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Christian Theology, Anti-Liberalism and Modern Jewish Thought

In this paper I will explore not so much the impact or trace of modern Jewish thought on Christian theology, as its absence, its absence in particular at a juncture where one might have expected to find it. I want to probe, that is to say, a point at which the influence of modern Jewish thought is strikingly *missing* from contemporary Christian theological debates, and consider what might be the value to Christian theology of a greater engagement at this point.

There are, of course, traces of Judaism, and of modern Jewish thought specifically, to be found in contemporary Christian theology. Buber, or at least a few themes from Buber, are widely quoted. One can find Christian theologians grappling with Levinas in various ways. Hannah Arendt appears from time to time, Hans Jonas is beginning to become a presence, and one can find a theologian like Jürgen Moltmann making use of Bloch in one book, Heschel in another.¹

There is also to be found, in 20th and 21st century Christian theology, a serious wrestling with the question of Christianity's relation to Judaism. Christianity's traditional supersessionism, its traditional displacement theology, has been formally repudiated by a number of churches, and the question of how this repudiation requires a reshaping of the whole pattern of Christian narrative and doctrine continues to be a matter for reflection. Kendall Soulen's *The God of Israel and Christian theology*² offers an impressive example of this sort of work, and a forthcoming volume by Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*³, undertakes an important analysis, from a Jewish perspective, of a whole series of so-called postliberal Christian theologies with respect to their position on supersessionism.

This belated self-correction of Christian theology is very important, but engagement with Jewish thought—certainly with recent Jewish thought—is not, as far as I can see, a particularly central or necessary part of it. What is primarily at issue, if one wants to get away from supersessionism, is how Christian theology arranges its own elements: how it sees one part of its Scriptures in relation to another; how it understands one theological concept—that of 'Church'—in relation to another—'Israel'; and so on. What is at stake, to put it slightly differently, is a reform of how Christians think about Jews—and a number of other things in light of this—but not necessarily a particular focus on how Jews think of Christianity.⁴

The focus of this paper, then, will be on one recurring theme in modern Jewish thought, and particularly in modern Jewish thinking *about Christianity*, which has to my knowledge made no impact whatsoever on Christian theology, and my proposal will be that Christian theology might in fact benefit were it to pay some attention to this.

I

¹ The frequency with which appeal to Buber is made by Christian thinkers, and the paucity of reference of a figure like Rosenzweig, might suggest that the 'canon' of modern Jewish thinkers as perceived by Christian theologians has its own distinctive shape.

² R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).

³ Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011)

⁴ It is important not to exaggerate the distinction I am drawing here. Soulen, for example, is insistent that 'the path beyond supersessionism must go by way of renewed encounter with the theological claims of Jewish existence' (*The God of Israel*, p.5) and himself draws upon the work of Michael Wyschogrod.

The theme in question revolves around the notion of paganism. A number of Jewish thinkers over the last few centuries have envisaged some form of fundamental contrast between Judaism and paganism, and many present Christianity either as poised between the two poles, or as aligned with one—with Judaism --but nevertheless subject to a distinct leaning, a distinct temptation, towards the other—as constantly in danger of sliding towards paganism.

This is a pattern that seems to emerge in the Jewish Enlightenment, with a thinker like Solomon Formstecher, for instance, contrasting the religion of nature with the religion of spirit, where the religion of nature is termed paganism and the purest example of the religion of spirit is Judaism.⁵ In the one God is identified with nature, in the other God is recognized as transcending nature. Christianity and Islam are fundamentally classified, along with Judaism, on the side of a religion of spirit, but Christianity in fact contains a mixture of the false paganism with the ‘true transcendence of Judaism’ and Christianity’s history is construed as the history of a struggle between these elements. Or again, Samuel Hirsch presents religion in terms of paganism, Judaism, and Christianity, with paganism being valueless, Judaism representing the true religion which recognizes ethical freedom and the transcendence of God, and Christianity lying somewhere in the middle, having corrupted its Jewish inheritance with notions of original sin and salvation by Christ.

In the thought of a figure like Franz Rosenzweig, things become more complex, but something of the same pattern seems to emerge. Paganism is no longer characterized completely negatively, nor is the term used quite so broadly as a catch-all for everything contrasted to Judaism. Paganism seems to be paradigmatically the position of the ancient Greeks, and in Rosenzweig’s thought it stands in contrast to, and in position of superiority to, religions of the East such as Buddhism—and also indeed to Islam. So Rosenzweig’s presentation of paganism is at least partly sympathetic—it seems to represent something like the best we can do, the highest expression of human longing, prior to revelation. Rosenzweig also, in a certain sense, has a very positive view of Christianity—it is not understood, in its difference from Judaism, purely in terms of corruption, lack, deviation, but as having, alongside Judaism, a crucial providential role.

So the story is considerably more complex in Rosenzweig, but for all that something of the pattern of the thinkers of the Haskalah is still to be found: Rosenzweig presents Christians as always threatened by a reversion into paganism. Thus, while Jews are born Jewish, Christians always have to become Christian—they all begin as pagans, they are constantly needing to resist their paganism.⁶ Rosenzweig writes that there is a ‘piece of paganism in every Christian’, and it shows itself in the centrality of the incarnation, in the fact that the Christian can only trust that God wants to condescend to him if God can appear as man, in the fact that for the Christian God’s vitality only becomes real if it appears in the flesh of a particular man.⁷ Or again, Rosenzweig suggests that because Christianity has to be on a mission to incorporate the pagan peoples within it, it is constantly in danger of absorbing the

⁵ The account of figures from the Jewish Enlightenment in this paragraph draws from Norbert M. Samuelson’s *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

⁶ ‘This is indeed the profoundest difference between the Jewish and the Christian man, that the Christian man, innately, or at least on account of birth—is a pagan, but the Jew is a Jew. So the way of the Christian must be a way of self-renunciation, he must always go away from himself, give himself up in order to become Christian’ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, tr. Barbara E. Galli, (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p 430.

⁷ *Ibid*, p.371. It is worth mentioning that the discussion here concludes on a rather positive note: ‘precisely that “paganism” of the Christian qualifies him for the conversion of the pagans.’

paganism itself. Christianity hovers, then, necessarily but also dangerously, problematically, between Judaism and paganism.

To bring things up to our own time we might point to a figure like my colleague Agata Bielik-Robson. Bielik-Robson is engaged in an ambitious project of intellectual reorientation, seeking to persuade us to redraw our fundamental philosophical and cultural maps so that Jewish thought can be seen not as a marginal and peculiar phenomenon, a ‘Yiddish twist’ on the fringes of mainstream cultural developments⁸, but rather as both a powerful shaping force on modernity and the bearer of one of the fundamental options which now lies open to us. Her argument is woven in part out of an exploration of and conversation with a wide range of figures, and quite frequently we meet, once again, in her thought and in her treatment of others, ‘pagan’ as a category which stands in some kind of fundamental opposition to the Jewish.⁹ And though the role or significance of Christianity does not (thus far, in any case) hold as prominent a place in her thought as it does in that of Rosenzweig, there are clear indications in her scheme also that some forms of Christianity, at least, are in danger of going over into paganism.¹⁰

II

Now, if one accepts that there is such a strand in modern Jewish thought, one might suppose that there is in fact good reason why Christian theologians have not thus far attended to it. One might suppose that Christian theology, if it is going to remain in any sense Christian, must simply reject or dismiss this accusation of paganism; that what is at stake here is an irreducible difference between Christianity and Judaism, so that a theologian could not ask whether there might not be something worth worrying listening to here, and in particular something worth worrying about, without thereby in fact ceasing to be a specifically *Christian* theologian.

Certainly some of the aspects of Christianity which have been associated by Jewish thinkers with paganism, such as the incarnation or the link between Christ and salvation are non-negotiable for most main-stream Christians. But the recurring concern about a kind of pagan temptation of Christianity seems to go beyond this, at least in some of its articulations: it is not just that Christianity is presented as *being* pagan, or partly pagan, but that it is depicted as *tempted* in this direction, as exposed to particular *dangers* of drifting off in this direction. And given that Christianity does also understand itself as holding onto an affirmation of God’s transcendence, God’s otherness from nature, from creation, then it ought to have its own reasons for taking seriously any suggestions that it is in fact in danger of sliding into paganism.

⁸ Bielik-Robson regrets the tendency of most histories of Jewish thought to present a ‘Jewish irredeemable particularity which always adds something exotically “Yiddish” to the clear and universal idiom of Western philosophy’ (‘Is there such a thing as Jewish Philosophy’, University of Nottingham Inaugural lecture).

⁹ C.f. for instance the presentation of certain understandings of the sublime as pagan in “Troubles with Divine Aesthetics: A. J. Heschel’s Tarrying with the Sublime,” in *Abraham Joshua Heschel. Philosophy, Theology and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Adam Lipszyc and Stanisław Krajewski, Harrasowitz Verlag: Wiesbaden 2009, pp. 67-86, or the way the category is introduced through a discussion of Rosenzweig in “Nihilism through the Looking Glass: Nietzsche, Rosenzweig, and Scholem on the Condition of Modern Disenchantment,” in *Revero. Revista de Estudos da Religiao*, San Paulo, Spring 2008.

¹⁰ One can see this, for example, in ‘Nihilism Through the Looking Glass,’ and its examination of what is involved in certain understandings of the resurrection and in certain Christian theologies of participation and the beatific vision.

The issue is of course a large one, but one dimension of the Judaism/paganism pattern of thought that I will focus on here is the link that some Jewish thinkers suggest between paganism and modern disenchantment, or rather, the link between the *repudiation* of paganism and the disenchantment of modernity. If paganism has something to do with the sacralization of nature, sheer awe at the greatness of being, if it has something to do with finding and worshipping something divine in the world, then the modern process of disenchantment, of stripping the world of its sacredness, of its mythic qualities, of its meaning even, should be understood not so much nostalgically as a loss of a necessary religious sensibility, as a development which makes it *harder* for the modern person to turn to God, but in a fundamentally more positive light. Modern disenchantment is something Jewish thought can be seen both to move towards and to affirm. If a mythicising paganism is no longer an option, then faced with a meaningless world stripped bare, the possibility of acknowledging the transcendence of God is enhanced, rather than diminished.¹¹

III

Christian theology, I have already suggested, gives no attention to the strand of thought I have been discussing. A reader of Christian theology will not meet ‘paganism’ as a category of critique or concern in contemporary Christian thought, much less any reflection on whether Christianity itself may be peculiarly threatened by a temptation towards it. One could perhaps point to the category of ‘idolatry’ as the closest approximation-- idolatry as temptation and danger can appear as a concern in Christian theology, though not necessarily at the moment a particular dominant one—but the term functions considerably more narrowly than the notion of ‘paganism’ and the richly textured discussion which surrounds it in seems to in modern Jewish thought.¹²

It would be difficult to give a unified *positive* account of the state of contemporary Christian theology, but one thing common to many of the strongest voices, certainly in recent British and American theology— voices ranging from Hauerwasians to the followers of the so-called Yale school to the adherents of Radical Orthodoxy to the Barthians—is a *negative* point: they are united in rejecting theological liberalism, not only the 19th century liberalism running from Schleiermacher through Ritschl, but anything which much more broadly could be said to smack of liberalism. The danger is understood to be one of accommodation, loss of nerve, loss of theological substance, loss of Christian distinctiveness. A liberal is seen as one who is so concerned to adopt to the times, or to make sense to the mentality of our age, or to speak to the modern person, or to justify the rationality or the meaningfulness of Christianity, so concerned to do all these things that they in fact distort the gospel, evacuate theology of its proper content. What is valued across at least a number of these otherwise differing groups, I think, is the capacity to articulate Christian distinctiveness, and often to retrieve pre-modern modes of thought, ways of doing theology, ways of reading scripture.

This is not intended to paint a picture of contemporary Christian theology as fundamentalist. Many in fact argue that fundamentalism is just the other side of the same coin

¹¹ In ‘Nihilism through the Looking Glass’ Bielik-Robson highlights (in the context of a larger and more complex argument, which has a confrontation between ‘the Nietzscheans’ and ‘the Hebrews’ at its core) an affirmation of *Entzauberung*, the embracing of a modern secularizing disenchantment as a necessary religious moment, as a feature of the thought of a number of modern Jewish thinkers. So, for instance, she writes ‘for Rosenzweig (and for the whole Judaic tradition, for which Rosenzweig serves here as a spokesman and *pars pro toto*), religion... is a mature, courageous stance towards reality, actively forcing its demythologization and disenchantment.’

¹² One is more likely in contemporary Christian theology to find idolatry employed as a term of critique *ad extra*—the idolatry of capitalism or of the celebrity culture, for instance—than as tool for self-examination.

as liberalism, equally enthralled to a modern mindset and equally mistaken. Nor ought this description of a dominant anti-liberalism suggest that current Christian theologians are simply conservative, or simply wanting to retreat into the middle ages. They may value a rediscovery of certain pre-modern ways of thinking, but it is a matter of *rediscovery*, of creative retrieval, and not simply of blind repetition. Modern and liberal values are as a matter of fact present, in my judgment, in the way contemporary theologians proceed., but their focus, and the focus of current Christian theological rhetoric, tends not to be on any of this, but on the need to preserve distinctiveness and on the dangers of liberal accommodation.

In the dominant voices of contemporary Christian theology, then--the theology of the past fifteen or twenty years at least--'modernity' appears principally in negative guise, as danger, as that which we must avoid judging ourselves by and moulding ourselves to. It appears as that which is alien, as that which distorts. There have certainly been theologians in the last half century who have taken a far more positive approach, who have found in modernity something positive for Christian faith, something that represents an advance, a clarification, an opportunity—but such thinkers all now have the ring of liberals, and as a result they are little published, little read, little taught, little written on-- they do not get much attention, except occasionally as foil.

IV

If the rejection of paganism, as I suggested above, has been linked to one of the central features of modernity—disenchantment—does it follow that *nervousness* of modernity might in fact carry with it particular dangers of paganism? The link, stated thus abstractly, sounds perhaps a little far-fetched, but experience may bear it out. I want to consider at this point a kind of case study: two Roman Catholic theologians, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, one German and one German-speaking Swiss, near contemporaries who were at their intellectual peak in the 1950s, 60s and 70s.

Rahner and Balthasar are not infrequently treated as signalling two very different roads down which Roman Catholic theology could go. Some, particularly Rahnerians, have wanted to be more irenic, to avoid polarisation, to see Rahner and Balthasar as complementary rather than contrasting figures, but after quite a long period of reflection I am inclined to think it is probably right that they really do represent distinctly contrasting possibilities. In any case, in the 1960s and early 1970s, Rahner's star was in the ascendant, Balthasar a rather doubtful and shadowy figure, but since then Balthasar's standing in the Church and among theologians has been steadily ascending, while Rahner is very much less in fashion. And this is true outside of Roman Catholicism as much or more than it is true within it—Balthasar is the conversational partner of choice for a whole range of Protestant and Anglican thinkers who wish to engage with a Catholic, whereas Rahner is routinely dismissed.

One point on which Rahner and Balthasar quite sharply diverge is precisely in their relation to modernity. Rahner tends to stress that we all are inescapably modern, that Christian faith must be formulated in an idiom that the modern person can understand and integrate with their thinking more broadly, and indeed that there are aspects of modernity which contribute to something like a purification of Christian faith. Balthasar's rhetoric towards modernity is, on the other hand-- at least after a certain point in his development-- almost entirely negative. Modernity is cast generally in terms of loss, of lack, of deficiency, of blindness: it is something whose self-satisfaction and smugness needs to be pierced.¹³

¹³ For a more extended discussion of the relationship between the two, and their differing attitudes to modernity, c.f. my "Balthasar and Karl Rahner" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, eds. Edward T. Oakes, S. J. and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

The positive, or partly positive, tone that Rahner takes towards modernity is a significant part of what has led to his marginalization in more recent theology. His thought is routinely presented as controlled, shaped, distorted, by an option for modern philosophical thought in general, or the Kantian transcendental turn more specifically. And conversely the fact that Balthasar is seen as standing apart from modernity, as presenting a genuinely different possibility for theology, seems to be a significant dimension of his appeal.

But the reason for attending to Rahner and Balthasar in this context is not just to see that Christian theologians take different stances towards modernity, and at the moment the anti-modern tone is winning more votes. What is particularly interesting is that Balthasar's anti-modern rhetoric does indeed seem to go hand in hand with what one might call a slide towards paganism.

I have avoided offering any very precise conception of paganism—the various figures whom I mentioned do not necessarily present it in exactly the same way—but I think it is safe to say that on almost *any* conception of what paganism might be, Balthasar can be seen as moving Christian theology in that direction. There are a number of ways one might make this point—one could talk about the significance of his developing a notion of a so-called 'theological aesthetics', or even perhaps of the implications of his dramatic approach to theology. One could perhaps examine the consequences of the unusual role in his theology given to Adrienne von Speyer and her mystical experiences. But what I will focus on here is what one might call his 're-mythologizing' of Christianity.

This process of re-mythologizing goes on in a quite wide-spread way across Balthasar's oeuvre. It is possible to understand his much-discussed theology of Holy Saturday, with its vivid and untraditional presentation of Christ's sinking passively into hell, as one dead among the dead, and enduring the full horror of abandonment and rejection by God, as a kind of innovative mythologization of the atonement. One can look more generally at his treatment of the eternal relations between the persons of the Trinity, which he can somehow describe in considerable detail—a kind of detail that I have met nowhere else in the Christian tradition—complete with references of the divine persons' gratitude, amazement, prayer towards one another, their consideration for one another, even their decision-making procedures (he seems able to know, for instance, that the Father has the general intention of saving the world, but leaves it to the Son to decide exactly how to go about it).¹⁴

Alternatively, one can look at his presentation of the characters who surround Jesus in the Gospels—Mary, Peter, John, Paul—not as historical individuals, but as the fundamental constellation of the Church, as quasi-eternal types, so that Peter, for instance, represents not just himself, a particular individual, nor even, as you might expect for a Roman Catholic, the first in the line of popes, but actually the institutional element in the church as such, popes, bishops and clergy, hierarchy, the need for order and rules, for office in the church; and again John represents not just an individual, but love, the saints, the charismatic element, sanctity in the church. And so when Peter and John go to the empty tomb, and John arrives first but stands aside for Peter, this is an expression of the relation of the church as holiness to the church as institution. One might argue that it mythicising reading of Mary is well-established in the Catholic tradition, but here Balthasar is not simply taking up familiar patterns, but freely inventing new ones.

What is in my judgment the most significant and disturbing element of re-mythologization Balthasar introduces appears in what is sometimes rather euphemistically described as his 'nuptial theology'. Gender difference—the difference between the man,

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of Balthasar's Trinitarian theology and its extraordinarily well-informed quality, c.f. my 'Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Trinity' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

construed as active and taking initiative, and the woman, construed as receptive—plays a key role in Balthasar’s thought, as does also the pattern of sexual reproduction. One meets gendered conceptions of activity and receptivity, and indeed images of seeds and wombs, at almost every level in Balthasar’s writings. He makes much of the scriptural image of the Church as the bride of Christ, and he also wants to retrieve the traditional deduction from this that Mary should be viewed as the bride of Christ. But he also, going beyond anything that one can find in the tradition, so far as I am aware, views the relation of the institutional church to the laity as a male/female relation—in fact as a relation to be spoken of in terms of insemination and of ‘bearing fruit’—and he conceives of relationships within the Trinity in gendered manner: the Son is feminine with respect to a masculine Father, since the Father as begetter is the initiator, and the Son receives everything from the Father. But above all, and running through nearly all his thought, is the notion that the God-world relation must be conceived in male-female terms, because God is the initiator, the active party, and the world is receptive, but able to bear fruit. The systematic way this kind of thinking permeates his work suggests that for Balthasar this is not one metaphor among other possible metaphors for speaking about something which eludes us, but that this really *is* the nature of God’s relation to the world, or to put it another way, this really *is* the deepest meaning of the man-woman relationship and of sex itself. So for instance Balthasar argues that priests cannot be women, because they must represent Christ in relation to the church, and Christ was not just contingently male, but *had* to be a man because he in turn represented God in relation to the world.¹⁵

Unsurprisingly, there has been a certain amount of criticism of Balthasar’s conception of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, and a certain hesitation, at least, as regards his introduction of gender into the Trinity. But in general what I have been describing as remythologizing passes more or less uncriticised in most of the literature surrounding Balthasar. Commentators note perhaps that his thought is at times ‘idiosyncratic’ and surprising, but generally they associate this with the originality and energy of his work, and the enviable freedom Balthasar has achieved from the constraints that modern theology usually allows itself to be put under: he is not engaged in a dessicated, spiritually dry *academic* style of theology; he is not frightened or controlled by the demands of historical-critical scholarship; he is not buying into a narrow, impoverished vision of rationality of the Enlightenment.

V

Balthasar, then, might be taken to exemplify the dangers of a slide towards paganism within Christian theology, and in particular of a slide towards paganism which may be correlated with a theology which sets its face too simply against modernity. But more than I am interested in Balthasar here, I am interested in the *reception* of Balthasar by other Christian theologians, Catholic and non-Catholic. In fact I know a number of theologians who have little time for Balthasar, who are quite troubled by him, but on the whole they simply keep quiet and avoid him. They do not have, one could say, the means of a decisive critique easily to hand. There is a widely available shorthand for what people think is wrong with Rahner—he is too liberal, too Kantian, too captive to modern modes of thought—but none for what may in fact make many hesitate over Balthasar. If the accusation of a slide towards paganism came as readily to the lips of Christian theologians as the accusation of a slide towards liberalism, a much more articulate critique of Balthasar might by now have taken hold, and more generally Christian theology might proceed with a little more balance,

¹⁵ For a helpful discussion of Balthasar on gender c.f. Corrine Crammer’s ‘One sex or two? Balthasar’s theology of the sexes’ in the *Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*.

opposing to the fear of liberal accommodation to the times on the one side the fear of paganising subChristian backsliding on the other.

What I have suggested so far is that if Christian theology could in some way take on board, even in part, the suggestion that paganism may be a danger, a temptation, constantly threatening it, this might introduce a useful means of self-critique, and might bring about a certain shift in the dominant contemporary theological mood. This would also, it is worth noting, represent a significant shift on another level, a shift in thinking about what it might mean for Christian theology to take Judaism seriously. While this has been a real concern for at least some Christian theologians, on the whole the presumption has been that it is precisely in rejecting liberalism and questioning many of the presuppositions of modernity that Christian theology will be in a position to be serious about its relationship with Judaism—for only then can Christianity take its roots, its particularity, its concreteness, to be central to its identity. Only if we free ourselves, the thinking usually goes, from an Enlightenment mentality with its premium on universality and a neutrally conceived rationality can we begin to rediscover that it is precisely the God of Israel that we worship, and can we begin to notice just how thoroughly and decisively Christianity is rooted in Judaism. But what I am suggesting is more or less the reverse of this: that if Christianity focuses too heavily on purging itself of liberal tendencies and on setting its face against modernity, then it may fail to take Judaism seriously, in the sense that it will miss a significant chance to learn something it really needs to know from modern Jewish thought.